

PUI-LAM LAW

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The Revival of Folk Religion and Gender Relationships in Rural China

A Preliminary Observation

Abstract

With the rapid revival of folk religions in southern China, it seems that economic modernity in the Pearl River Delta may not lead to total disenchantment with beliefs concerning magic in the cosmos. Rather, the revival of folk religions is serving as a countervailing re-embedding force from the localities, leading to the coexistence of traditional and modern elements. Through the study of the folk religions in a village in Guangdong, this paper attempts to demonstrate the preliminary observation that certain practices in folk religion have a reciprocal relationship with patrilineal gender relations in the Pearl River Delta.

Keywords: Folk religion—temple worship—shaman—patriarchal culture—gender relations

Asian Folklore Studies, Volume 64, 2005: 89–109

SIMILAR TO the case in Taiwan,¹ the practice of folk religion in rural southern China, particularly in the Pearl River Delta, has thrived as the economy has developed. Ancestral halls and temples have been rebuilt and ancestral altars have been set up in every house. Statues of deities, particularly of Guanyin (觀音菩薩, the goddess of mercy) and Guangong (關公, the god of justice), the most popular deities in Guangdong, have been installed on altars in every newly opened business or restaurant.² Activities relating to folk religion have again become an important part of social life since 1979. In contrast to Weberian predictions, these phenomena suggest that drastic economic development in the Pearl River Delta may not lead to total disenchantment with beliefs concerning magic in the cosmos. On the contrary, the revival of folk religions in the Delta region is serving as a countervailing re-embedding force³ from the local cultural context, leading to the coexistence of the world of enchantments and the modern world.

Folk religious practices, particularly those in rural areas of China, have been regarded as a form of diffused religious practice, in contrast to the structural pattern of Taoism or Buddhism in Chinese society.⁴ Folk religions are indeed not restricted to one source of religious ideas but are combinations of ideas on magic and doctrinal elements of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Folk religions thus rely upon the structured religions for the development of theological or mythical concepts and the forming of ritual practices (YANG 1970, 295). Despite the fact that folk religions are diffused and eclectic, they have had much influence on the stability of the patrilineal system.⁵ In view of recent developments in southern China, it seems that this relationship continues to hold amid advancements in economic conditions. Through the study of a village in Guangdong, this paper attempts to further elaborate on the relationship between the revival of folk religions and the resurgence of the patrilineal system. It is argued here that certain practices in folk religion have a reciprocal relationship with patrilineal gender relations that exist in the Pearl River Delta.

Of the folk religious practices that have been observed in villages in the Pearl River Delta, the revival of ancestor worship in rural areas is commonly still

confined to male members of the family. On the other hand, the fact that those worshipping in temples are mainly women is worth noting.⁶ During temple fairs or any important festivals such as the birthday of Guanyin, the temples will be flooded with women. Some will burn incense to the deities in hopes that blessings will fall on their domestic affairs, some will pray for temple oracles or have their fortune told, and some hope to be healed magically by communicating with deities through shamans. Women are worshipping deities in the temples and consulting shamans to mediate spiritually for them on a scale proportionate to the striking development of the economy in the 1990s. Based upon these phenomena, the discussion of this paper will be divided into three sections. The first and the second parts will focus on the revival of temple worship and the practice of consulting shamans for magical healing in a village in the Pearl River Delta; the third part will discuss the reciprocal relationship between practices in folk religion and gender inequalities in rural society in southern China.

TEMPLE WORSHIP

Baixiu Village⁷ is one of twenty-eight villages in Quinyang Town, Dongguan. At the end of 2002, over thirty-eight temples had been rebuilt or renovated in the villages of Quinyang Town. Nearly every village had rebuilt its own temple to serve the local community. Baixiu Village also had its two temples rebuilt in the mid-1990s.

Before 1949, there were six temples in Baixiu Village. Qishou Bajiao Pusa (七手八腳菩薩, a deity with seven hands and eight legs) was worshipped in the Xiang Kou Temple (巷口廟). Hongsheng Gong (洪聖公, a deity surnamed Hong) and Qitian Dasheng (齊天大勝, sometimes also called Houwang 猴王 or the monkey king god), were worshipped in the Dai Wang Temple (大王廟) and the Hou Wang Temple (猴王廟), respectively. Two loyal officials called Yang Zongbao (楊宗保) and Li Ning (李寧) were worshipped in the Yang and Li Temple (楊李二姓公廟). In the Yi Ling Temple (醫靈廟), Yi Ling Shen (醫靈神, the god of healing) was worshipped and Guangong (關公) was worshipped in the Guan Di Temple (關帝廟).⁸ During the Cultural Revolution, four of these temples were destroyed. Only the Yi Ling and Guan Di Temples were saved. They were then given to poor peasants for their use.

In 1995, the villagers found out that temples in other villages had been repaired, so they began to consider rebuilding their temples.⁹ As houses had been built on the original sites of the four destroyed temples, they decided to repair the Yi Ling and Guan Di Temples so as to give the villagers places to worship the deities.

The villagers who were responsible for rebuilding the temples were mainly elderly. They raised RMB200,000 to buy back the right to use the temples from

the tenants who had been residing there since the era of collectivism, and to rebuild the temples. The rebuilding began in 1995. By the end of 1996, the temples had been successfully completed. In December, a ceremony of spiritualization (開光) was held to invite the gods to return to the two temples.

The spiritualization ceremony for the two temples began at midnight of the day the temples were reopened. A group of Taoist priests carried out the ceremony. During the ceremony, the spirits of the gods were invited to move into the statues that represented them, as it is believed that statues are not only made of clay, but that spirits will live inside them if the invitation ceremony is successful. Before twelve o'clock, the temples were thronged with old women from the village, who had begun to prepare symbolic money, paper gold, and paper silver for the deities. As soon as the ceremony finished, they strove to be the first group of worshippers to show their sincerity so that they could receive more blessings from the gods. The day after the ceremony, a large number of villagers worshipped in the temple. Most of them were women, and only a few men went to worship the deities.

Wang Yun-hing, whom the villagers usually call Uncle Hing, and who was responsible for chairing the ceremony as he was a senior kinsman of the Wang lineage in Baixiu Village, said, "Worshipping gods is mostly done by women, men seldom do so. This may be because women are more sincere to the gods or maybe just because they are very superstitious!"

Interestingly, when I went to the villages in Quinyang Town to visit the rebuilt temples, I found that many male villagers did not know where their temples were, and some even did not know they had temples. But most female villagers could tell me where the temples were. It is normally women who go to temples. They go on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, and on some special festivals. They pray for their husbands, children, and other family members. Men seldom go to the temples, although it is not the case that men do not believe in the deities. Uncle Hing also said, "Men also worship gods in temples when they come across important issues. I remember that when I was a teenager, there was a feud between the neighboring village and ours. Senior villagers led all of the men to the temples to worship the gods so that we could win the battle and drive away the outsiders. In the end, the gods helped us and we defeated our enemies. Most of them were driven away or were beaten to death."

Other male villagers shared the same idea as Uncle Hing that something important must happen for them to worship in temples, such as a feud or an issue concerning business, as they consider these to be men's issues that women do not understand and with which they would be unable to help. In family affairs, such as children falling sick, a father will seldom go to the temple to pray for his children, however much he loves them. Instead, it seems that they believe that it is their wives' duty to worship the deities and pray for their children.

These activities of worship reflect the division of labor between men and women, with women expected to stay indoors and attend to domestic work (WOLF 1985, 79-111).

The appearance and internal structure of the two rebuilt temples in Baixiu Village are identical; only the statues of the gods are different. In the Yi Ling Temple, the main deity Yi Ling, is placed against the rear wall and faces the front door. Above the deity, there is a large, square-shaped piece of brocade on which is written *shenquan puzhao* (神光普照, the light of the deity illuminates widely). This was dedicated by a worshipper in thanksgiving for the blessings bestowed by the god. In front of the deity a lamp with seven stars is placed on a table. On the first and fifteenth days of every month, or on other important dates, this lamp is lit to show that the deity will illuminate the worshippers. A tube-shaped container with a leaf in a bowl filled with water is also placed on the table and is used to wash the deity's face. On some important dates, or when a ceremony of thanksgiving to the god is taking place, worshippers will bring food to thank the god. The villagers will place a roasted pig, along with chicken, goose, rice, tea, wine and fruit on the table. To the left and right of the table, there are two deities whose purpose is to protect the main deity. There are also two other deities standing beside the main deity, who are responsible for preparing medicine. The god of fortune is located at the front door. Incense burners are placed in front of each of these gods. In the middle of the temple are a large incense burner and a tripod used to burn paper gold, paper silver, and symbolic money to the deities. Above the incense burner are iron ropes attached to the roof from which an incense coil (香塔) is hung. The incense coil looks like a round biscuit before being hung, but once hung, it is spiral-shaped and resembles a cone. It can last for fifteen days after being lit. The incense coil is also used in some important festivals or when villagers want to thank the gods. Devotees come on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month and light the incense coil to worship the deities. Worshippers light joss sticks before they enter the temple, which they place three or five at a time in each incense burner. They then politely thank the deity. After worshipping, they beat a drum and hit a bell, both of which have been placed beside a wall, and recite their names to tell the deities who they are and what their wishes are. Traditionally, a drum and bell is placed on the right and the left side of the gods, respectively, and are referred to as the "left bell" (左鐘) and "right drum" (右鼓). In the Yi Ling Temple, however, this practice has been forgotten, and both the bell and the drum are situated on the right-hand side of the temple.

Guangong is the main deity in the Guan Dai Temple, which is similar to the Yi Ling Temple. The statue of Guangong stands against the rear wall and faces the front door. A piece of brocade with *shenquan puzhao* written on it also hangs above the deity. Ten little statues of Guangong, each about one foot high,

are placed beside the god. These have been donated by businessmen. To the left, two other deities stand: Zhao Yuan (趙雲), a general and a very close friend of Guangong; and Wangong Xiansheng (王公先聖, a deity considered the ancestor of Baixiu villagers). The deity at the front door is also a famous soldier who was under Guangong's command.

According to folk religious beliefs in the Pearl River Delta, Yi Ling, Guangong, and other deities in the temples have their own special abilities and characteristics. For example, Yi Ling is responsible for watching over the health of the people and for healing sicknesses; Guangong is the god of justice and bravery. When worshippers come to worship Yi Ling, however, they do not do so merely for good health, they are also seeking good fortune. They also treat Guangong as a god who can bring them wealth and prosperity in business. In recent years villagers involved in business have begun keeping statues of Guangong in their offices and homes in order to help them make great fortunes. Some villagers even worship Guangong in the hope of having a son though Guangong is not normally associated with assisting in the bearing of sons. All of this reveals the fact that a pragmatic attitude is the dominant approach taken by the villagers when worshipping deities (WELLER 1994, 149–50; YANG 1970, 282–83).

Although there are the Yi Ling and Guan Di Temples in Baixiu Village, some villagers go to other temples in other nearby villages to worship. There are temples in every village but the deities worshipped are not the same. For instance, the deity of Yi Ling in Baixiu Village is not worshipped in other villages in Quinyang Town. Villagers believe that even if an Yi Ling Temple were to be built and a statue of Yi Ling made, it is very unlikely that the deity could be invited to move into the temple. They believe that it is a matter of sincerity and fate, and that even if all of the temples had the same deity, he would not enjoy the same popularity in each. Blessings are associated with the efficacy of worship of the deity. For example, southeast of Baixiu Village, the Lu Zu Temple (呂祖廟) in Sheungkok Village is very popular with worshippers. Joss sticks are continuously lit in front of the deity, incense coils hang everywhere in the temple, and the temple becomes extremely crowded on important dates. In comparison with the Lu Zu Temple, it is rare for people to worship in the Guan Di Temple in Baixiu Village. The villagers believe that the unpopularity of the Guan Di Temple is mainly because of the low number of blessings received.¹⁰

Most of the temples around Baixiu Village are dedicated to popular deities like Xuantian Shangdi (玄天上帝, the chief of all deities), Qitian Dasheng, Guanyin, Baiyi Niangniang (白衣娘娘, goddess of white clothes), Guangong, and Hongshen Ye (洪聖爺). Among these deities, Guanyin, Baiyi Niangniang, and Shier Nainiang (十二奶娘, deities of twelve mothers), have seldom been treated as the main deity in a temple before, but are most popular with women. Women in Baixiu Village and other villages in Dongguan who long to have sons

worship these gods. Although no one knows what Guanyin's gender is, everyone, particularly the female villagers, believe her to be female. With the same gender as Guanyin, female villagers think that she will be kind to them, and the same is true of Baiyi Niangniang and the Shier Nainiang. Those deities are believed to not only protect women, but also to give them sons. For example, Guanyin, who is believed to save people from danger and desperate situations, is also a deity who gives sons to devoted female worshippers; Baiyi Niangniang is responsible for giving white flowers, that is, sons; and Shier Nainiang are also deities who give sons.

To the North of Baixiu Village, in Bakchak Village, there is a Guanyin Temple that is popular and attractive to nearby villagers, including those from Baixiu Village. The internal structure of every temple in the area is more or less the same as in Baixiu Village. Inside the Guanyin Temple, the main statue of Guanyin stands in the middle. Tian Hou (天后, Queen of Heaven) and Qitian Dasheng are situated on the left and Jinhua Furen (金花夫人, Lady of Golden Flowers) and Taohua Xiannü (桃花仙女, deities of Peach Blossoms) are placed on the right. In front of the statue of Guanyin, stands a table for offerings. Above the table is a lamp with seven stars, an incense burner, and a bowl of water with a leaf inside for the deity to wash its face. The decorations there are similar to those in the temples of Baixiu Village. The statues of Shier Nainiang are placed on the left-hand side of the temple. Female villagers who come to pray for the blessing of sons first worship and offer incense to Guanyin and then to the other deities in the temple. If there is a shaman in the temple, the women will ask the shaman to tell Guanyin that they want a son. Some of them will invite the shaman to the temple to carry out a ceremony to pray for sons, after which they will worship the Shier Nainiang. The Shier Nainiang are deities of twelve mothers and their surnames are Zhang, Jiang, He, Peng, Ding, Qi, Liu, Ma, Zhen, Guan, Xu, and Yuan. None of the statues of Shier Nainiang looks the same. Some of them carry two children, some carry one, and some carry nothing in their hands. One of the statues of Shier Nainiang, Ma, has nothing in her hands, which means that she will bring no sons. Some of them have a boy and a girl in their hands, which means they will bring a boy and a girl to the devotees. After the villagers have worshipped the Shier Nainiang, those praying for sons will draw out a bunch of joss sticks, light them and place one in front of each Shier Nainiang statue in sequence. If the "mother" who gets the last joss stick has children in her hands, it is believed that that villager will have children. If not, the villager will have no child.

Temples are constantly being rebuilt, and temples like the Guanyin Temple are increasing in number. Most of the Guanyin Temples have Shier Nainiang statues inside. People who build temples know that the Shier Nainiang are popular, so they do not even care about where they place them. As a result, one can

find Shier Nainiang in the Hou Wang Temple, the Xuandi Temple (玄帝廟), or the Guan Di Temple. It would be fair to say, therefore, that statues of the Shier Nainiang exist in temples throughout Quinyang Town. Villagers do not seem to care about whom they should worship or in which temple, but are more concerned if the deity is efficacious.¹¹ In Baixiu Village, as mentioned above, some villagers even go to the Guan Di Temple to pray for a son.

A CANTONESE SHAMAN

Despite the fact that the temples are always flooded with women, men are in charge of the ceremonies of spiritualization. When women want to communicate with the deities, they have to find shamans to do this for them. Thus, in addition to temple worship, women often seek out shamans¹² to solve family problems. Of the shamans from whom the Baixiu villagers often seek help, Ah Kiu is one of the more famous.

Ah Kiu is a female shaman who lives in Namchak Village, a part of Quinyang Town which is located to the south of Baixiu Village. She is about fifty-four, fairly small, tanned, and slightly chubby. In appearance, she is a typical Guangdong village woman.

The house where Ah Kiu has set her altar is also in Namchak Old Village, about a hundred meters from her own house. The house is quite shabby, with a little storeroom built behind it. About ten chairs are placed on the right side of the house for people who come to seek help from the gods. As Ah Kiu is a fairly famous shaman in Quinyang Town, during the deity-worshipping seasons her little house is always full of women, and some of them have to wait outside.¹³ On an incense altar facing the main door, Guanyin and Qitian Dasheng, the most popular deities in the Pearl River Delta, are worshipped. Next to these two main statues, another two, differently dressed, statues of Qitian Dasheng are worshipped. According to Ah Kiu, Qitian Dasheng is the main deity with whom she communicates.

The statues wear many gold necklaces and gold rings. Over ten hangings are draped from the ceiling or set against the walls, some of them embroidered with characters. Ah Kiu said that the necklaces, gold rings, and hangings had been given by the villagers in thanks for what they had received from the deities.

In addition to the statues, there is an incense burner used for worshipping the deities. Burning incense for this purpose is the first thing people do upon entering Ah Kiu's home. Next to the incense burners and the statues of Qitian Dasheng, there are small bottles filled with water and an overturned ball-shaped bottle with a long neck. According to Ah Kiu, when Qitian Dasheng appears, bubbles come out of the water-filled bottle and a popping sound can be heard.

Ah Kiu was forty-five when she became a shaman. Before this, she would

visit the temples like other village women. When she was about forty-three, she suddenly fell ill after returning home from a temple. Despite seeing doctors, she did not recover. When village women who visit temples regularly, or their family members, fall ill and do not recover after seeing doctors, they will visit a shaman for help. During her illness, Ah Kiu paid a visit to a shaman, who discovered that she had *xianggu* (仙骨, fairy bones) and had been chosen by the deities to be a spirit medium. Initially, she resisted taking on such a role. "At first I thought usually it is someone old who is chosen to be a shaman. I'm too young. I should do something else. It doesn't sound good to be a shaman and I will be laughed at. My family did not agree with such an idea either." Ah Kiu, therefore, rejected the shaman's offer at first. She continued: "When I got back home, my illness continued, but I still didn't want to be a shaman. I was ill for more than two years. Finally, I discussed it with my husband and my children. They didn't think it was good for me to go on suffering from the illness. They agreed with my decision to become a shaman."

Ah Kiu pointed out that a shaman represented the deities who help people solve their problems, and that she believed this to be charitable.

The example of how Ah Kiu became a shaman is quite common in the villages of southern China and throughout Southeast Asia (POTTER 1974, 225–28; JORDAN 1972, 67–84). Most of the shamans in Guangdong are women and they often experienced a long illness or a family crisis like the sudden death of a child, prior to becoming a shaman.

I heard from my informant a famous story that Ah Kiu once healed a youngster who frequently had headaches and could not swallow food. His parents had sought help from many doctors but they could not find a solution. Finally, the youngster's mother came to Ah Kiu for help. After being possessed by the deity, Ah Kiu found that the cause of the youngster's illness was his grandfather, who had been dead for many years. After having been buried for seven or eight years, his bones had been dug up by his descendants, in a process called *juejin* (掘金, gold-digging). It was said that Ah Kiu had successfully communicated with the deity and found that the skull of the youngster's grandfather had, for some reason, been lost in the golden tower (金塔). As a result, angry at his descendants for their lack of respect and failure to carry out their duties to him, he had come back to play tricks on them. After an ancestor's bones have been dug up and reburied in a golden tower, his descendants should open the golden tower and clean the bones in the memorial ceremonies held each spring and autumn. If this youngster's family had done so, they would have learned of the loss of the grandfather's skull. It is for this reason that the descendants were to blame. After listening to Ah Kiu's explanation, the youngster's family immediately asked her to carry out a healing ceremony, after which the youngster apparently recovered from his illness.¹⁴ In the supernatural world of such folk religions, ancestors are

very important. This type of story is very common in villages where the inhabitants strongly believe that ancestors will not bless or will do evil things to their descendants. These situations are always handled by shamans who, apart from holding ceremonies for the descendants, will also instruct them to treat their ancestors well, by burning more paper gold and paper silver to their ancestors. The following story is about an ancestor who did not have a good life in the nether world, and came back to complain to his family.

One night, probably a good date for communicating with ancestors according to the Lunar Calendar, Ah Kiu's little house was full of village women hoping to communicate with their ancestors through Ah Kiu. The process of communicating with the ancestors was fairly open, as people waiting their turn watched Ah Kiu communicate with other people's ancestors. During a séance, one village woman, who had come to watch the séance, was suddenly accused by her dead husband of not treating him well. All of the other villagers heard her husband accuse her of failing to burn anything for him at the festivals, which made his life in the nether world miserable. Widows are expected to be good to their dead husbands and to burn paper money, paper gold, and incense for them. This woman, therefore, was both frightened and ashamed by this public accusation of her failure to meet her responsibilities to her dead husband, which would be quickly known throughout the village. Sure enough, within a few days she had been criticized. Therefore, she immediately asked Ah Kiu to hold a ceremony for her husband. She burned a large amount of paper gold and silver, and many other commodities made of paper for him.

Apart from healing illnesses, communicating with ancestors and practicing geomancy, Ah Kiu is often asked to carry out a rite called *kai huayuan* (開花園, opening the flower gardens in heaven), which parents often request if their child is suffering from frequent illnesses or has behavioral problems.

On one such occasion which I observed, a woman from Baixiu Village visited Ah Kiu in the evening. Her son was frequently ill, so she brought along a piece of clothing belonging to her son to ask Ah Kiu to carry out *kai huayuan* for him. Ah Kiu asked the woman for her son's name and for the date and time of his birth. She then faced the altar with the child's clothing in her hand, and read aloud the child's name and the date and time of his birth to the statues of Qitian Dasheng. At the same time, the village woman knelt down, faced the incense burner, and kowtowed respectfully. After a while, Ah Kiu seemed to go into a trance and looked as though she would vomit. She then turned and faced the village woman, who was still kneeling on the floor. While mumbling the child's name and his date and time of birth, Ah Kiu began to sing.

Ah Kiu's incantation was stylized and rhythmic; however, I found the lyrics more difficult to understand than the local dialect. The first time I heard the song, I could not understand a single word. Later, I learnt that the song was

about, “having a strong foundation; bringing fortune to your father and luck to your mother; having relationships with your father, mother, and siblings are the predetermination of fate; having good health; no obstacles; being smart and clever in study; having relationships with teachers and classmates are the predetermination of fate.” Ah Kiu pointed out that when she was possessed by Qitian Dasheng, she had a very vague memory of the lyrics because she went into a trance. Although she has sung the *kai huayuan* song many times, she can only remember part of it.

After Ah Kiu had sung for a while, her assistant, her younger sister, put an oil lamp, a paper bridge, and a basin filled with rice and twelve duck eggs on the floor. The paper bridge was put between the rice and the oil lamp, so that they formed a straight line. While Ah Kiu continued singing, her hand, which held the child's clothing, kept turning back and forth above the basin in which the rice and the duck eggs had been placed. Her hand, still holding the child's cloth, then passed across the bridge as if bringing the child across. This was repeated many times. Ah Kiu then told the village woman that the child had been out of the garden and that she should discipline and teach her son well in the future. Ah Kiu then faced the altar again and closed her eyes. Soon after, she opened them again and said that Qitian Dasheng had gone and that the *kai huayuan* ceremony was over. After the ceremony, she told the village woman to take the oil lamp home and reminded her not to let the light go out until the next morning. Her son would then recover quickly and be healthy in the future. The village woman left about RMB150 towards the cost of the incense and offerings, and bowed respectfully before carrying the oil lamp very carefully home.

The meaning of the *kai huayuan* rite is as follows: In the garden in heaven, there are many plants, each representing a family. Normally, there are two colors of flowers on the plants: white to represent a boy and red for a girl. Each flower has a flower-lad, who represents a child on Earth. The flower-lad should always stay with the child he represents. Not every pot plant is healthy in the garden. Some flowers may be eaten by worms and others may lack water. As a result, these flowers cannot grow to be strong and the flower-lads become ill and unable to move. When this happens, the child on earth will be ill as well. If the flower-lad is very naughty and keeps playing in the garden, the child on earth will be a naughty child, who will be difficult to discipline and teach.

After being possessed, the female shaman visits heaven, where she identifies which child needs to undergo the *kai huayuan* rite, and which pot of flowers has problems. For example, she will check if any flowers, which represent a child, lack water or are decaying because of worms; or if any naughty flower-lads are playing in the garden everyday and are unwilling to return home. When she encounters either of these cases, she will pray to the deity for help. The deity will possess her body to solve the problem, either by healing the weak flower-lad or

by bringing the naughty one out of the garden and returning him to his heavenly home. If the ceremony is successful, the flower-lad will come back to his heavenly home, and the child he represents should become good and listen to his/her parents, or will recover from illness. In Ah Kiu's experience, the *kai huayuan* ceremony may not always be successful. She has had a few failures, where she was unable to bring flower-lads out of the garden despite having tried many times.

Folk religions consist of other, similar beliefs that pervade peasant society. Generally, villagers believe that if a pot plant, which represents their family, has white flowers, this means that they will have boys; if red, then girls. If a couple does not have any children after having been married for a long time, especially if they do not have any boys, they often become anxious. A wife is more likely to be anxious due to feelings of failure for not having produced a son to extend her husband's family line. In addition, she is likely to be afraid of being blamed for this by her husband's family, in particular, her mother-in-law. Very probably, women in this position will seek help from a shaman and ask her to go to the garden in heaven to see if their plants have white flowers or to find out the reason why there are no white flowers.

According to folk beliefs, there are many reasons why white flowers will not grow on the plants. Some plants are weak, so the white flowers cannot open; and others are eaten by golden chickens that stay nearby. To overcome this, a shaman like Ah Kiu will carry out ceremonies of worship and sacrifice for the women. Ah Kiu also teaches them that being both a good wife and an obedient daughter-in-law are very important, and that they should fulfill their filial duties and respect their mothers-in-law. Indeed, these teachings are sometimes inculcated to her clients through lyrics when she goes into a trance.

Ah Kiu also believes that she has discovered that another reason for the absence of white flowers is that the ghosts of dead relatives play tricks. Ah Kiu recalled one case of a couple with no children. The wife had been pregnant twice but had miscarried both times, so the wife went to see Ah Kiu, hoping to find the reason for this in the heavenly garden. While possessed by the deity, Ah Kiu discovered that before their marriage, the couple had conceived two children, but had had both aborted. Now, one of their daughters' spirits had returned to play tricks on her future siblings. Ah Kiu then arranged a marriage for the girl in the world of ghosts, hoping that she would have a family and not become a wandering ghost. Ah Kiu also instructed the spirit not to come back and never to do anything evil to her future siblings.

It is believed that in the garden in heaven, there are plants that never have flowers, either white or red. In this case the only thing a woman can do is to ask for white flowers from the deity. I observed Ah Kiu as she helped two women ask for white flowers. One, who was from Quinyang Town, already had a daughter but wanted a son. Her household was in Quinyang Town and not in a village,

which meant that she could only have one child. If she was to have a boy, she would lose her job and be fined. Both her husband's and her permanent household registrations would be cancelled, and the new born baby would not be allowed to have household registration.¹⁵ The other woman had two daughters and was from Baixiu Village. In order to have a son, she took the risk of paying a RMB60,000 fine or of being deprived of her and her newborn's annual dividend from the collective investment in Baixiu Village for sixteen years.¹⁶ In the year 2000, when she went for Ah Kiu, each villager was receiving an annual dividend of about RMB7,000.

On the day of the ceremony, Ah Kiu took the two women to the temples located on Mount Ma, at Daishan Town in Dongguan County. These temples had been rebuilt in the mid-1980s and, because of the efficacy of the deities there, the temples attract large numbers of worshippers. Two of the temples are dedicated to Qitian Dasheng and Baiyi Niangniang. Qitian Dasheng is the god that Ah Kiu worships and communicates with in séances, so she first brought the two women to the temple where Qitian Dasheng is worshipped, then led them to the one where Baiyi Niangniang is worshipped. Baiyi Niangniang is believed to be responsible for bringing white flowers to every family. If one pleads a favor from her wholeheartedly, she may help.

Ah Kiu took each of the women to the temple of Baiyi Niangniang in turn. As they entered, they had to first burn incense and candles to worship Baiyi Niangniang, then they knelt down on the floor facing the statue. Following Ah Kiu's example, they bowed respectfully to the statue and Ah Kiu asked to be possessed by the deity. During the séance, Ah Kiu held two *jiaobei* (掇杯) which she had prepared for divining the will of the deities. *Jiaobei* consist of small crescent-shaped pieces of wood. Each piece is convex on one side and flat on the other. After she had prayed to the goddess, she threw the *jiaobei* on the floor so as to understand the will of Baiyi Niangniang. The combination¹⁷ formed by the two pieces of wood on the floor seemed to show that Baiyi Niangniang would bring white flowers to the woman from Quinyang Town, but that the woman from Baixiu Village had only a relatively greater chance of receiving white flowers. After hearing the results, they left the temple and burned paper gold and paper money as offerings to Baiyi Niangniang. On the way to the temple, the two women had seemed very worried; but they both appeared happy afterwards, chatting and joking all the way back. Eventually, the woman from Quinyang Town did have a boy. As the family now had more than one child, however, their household registration was cancelled, and they hid elsewhere in order to avoid further penalty for staying illegally in their hometown.

Generally speaking, it is men who are involved in ancestor worship and women who visit shamans to ask for luck or for boys. In all the time I was at Ah Kiu's house, I never saw a single man. On one occasion a village woman's

daughter was said to be possessed by a spirit. Ah Kiu exorcised the spirit from the girl using Qitian Dasheng's power and, later, the girl recovered. One day, when I was at Ah Kiu's house observing her practice shamanism, the girl's mother came to thank the deity. She believed strongly in Qitian Dasheng, and knelt down on the floor bowing low for a long time. When she left, I found that she was accompanied by her husband. Instead of entering the house, her husband had remained at the entrance to the village while his wife performed the thanksgiving ceremony, before returning home with her.

A child's illness, naughtiness, or other problems that are believed to be caused by ghosts, worry parents very much. Generally speaking, however, it is the mother who shoulders the responsibility for caring for a child. The woman from Baixiu Village, who requested the *kai huayuan* rite for her ill son, is an example. Her son had been sick for a long time without recovering which, according to some villagers who knew her, made her very anxious. Her husband's family, and particularly her mother-in-law, blamed her for not having taken good care of her grandson. Clearly, the mother was being held responsible for her son's problems. In desperation, she sought help from Ah Kiu, asking her to perform the *kai huayuan* rite.

REVIVAL OF FOLK RELIGION AND GENDER RELATIONSHIPS IN RURAL CHINA

In view of the folk religious practices in Baixiu Village and in surrounding villages, the fact that most people consulting shamans and devotees in temple worship are women suggests a reciprocal relationship with traditional gender inequalities. In what follows, I shall tender my observations.

After the communists assumed power in China in 1949, radical reforms were carried out in the villages. Between 1950 and 1954, the private ownership of land was completely replaced by collective ownership. In addition to changes to the economic structure in rural areas, the communist government launched a series of anti-feudalism campaigns. In the 1960s, all forms of "feudal" activities had been brought to an end (AIJIMER and HO 2000, 197). For instance, the spring and autumn ancestral worship festivals were forbidden, ancestral halls were pulled down, and *fengshui* (風水) was banned. They were replaced by "Mao's socialist rituals infiltrating new sets of symbols into meaning-filled actions." (MADSEN 1984, 91) Many studies, such as WOLF (1985, 261) and STACY (1983, 266), however, point out that socialist ideology and patriarchal culture are not incompatible, and that the deep structure of the old patrilineage system remained intact during the decades between 1949 and the end of the Maoist era in the late 1970s (POTTER and POTTER 1990, 251–69). It is evident that when rural economic reforms were implemented in 1979 and political control was loosened, lineage activities began to emerge. In southern China, villagers began

to place a strong emphasis on traditional lineage activities that had been common prior to 1949 (THIREAU 1988, 305–10; AIJIMER and HO 2000, 16). Ancestral halls, which had been destroyed, were rebuilt in villages throughout the Delta. Genealogical books burnt during the Cultural Revolution were re-compiled. Ceremonies of ancestor worship held at the graves of the dead ancestors and in the newly constructed ancestral halls during the spring and autumn festivals were resurrected, and have become popular. There has been a rapid resurgence in patrilineage activities (JOHNSON 1993, 104).

The structure of the revived patrilineage system is similar to the structure prior to 1949, in which the main axis of the family is the father and son (HSU 1968, 1981; see also FEI 1992, 80–86). The revived ancestor worship is hence exclusively performed by male members of the family. Only women who have just married will worship ancestors, as they have to be introduced to their husband's family including the dead ancestors. In addition, girls can also participate in grave worship, but only when they are young. They do not need to join in the ceremonies when they grow up. Thus, they do not have to participate in worshipping their natal family's ancestors. During the spring and autumn festivals, they are only responsible for worshipping at the tablets of their husband's ancestors in the home. As ancestor worship is exclusively for men, women seldom have a chance to participate in it. Even if they do participate in the sacrifices, they are not regarded as important participants. Significantly, religious rituals of ancestor worship put women outside the male-dominated kinship system altogether (WATSON 1981, 610–11; WOLF 1972, 32–52). Thus, revived ancestor worship, in which men are the core members and women are merely the means of extending their bloodline, reinforces gender differences in a patrilineal society.

The issue of gender has been extended to the economic sector. During the process of rapid transition from collectivization to decollectivization, Mao's communist idea of women as equal to men has come to an end. Women have had to face unfair market competition during the course of the replacement of the state-controlled economy with a free market economy, as the patrilineal ideology is also dominant in the economic sector.¹⁸ For instance, in Baixiu Village, the opportunity to reach senior positions in factories is greater for men than for women. All of the directors in the more than seventy factories in Baixiu Village are men. Most of the senior supervisors are also men, while women are more likely to be junior supervisors (YUEN, LAW, and HO 2004). This phenomenon is quite common among villages in the Pearl River Delta. Women are working even harder compared to the conditions of the Maoist era (CROLL 1987, 482–83).

Many Chinese turn to the revived religions for support when they feel overwhelmed by the changes that have taken place in the post-Mao era (KIPNIS 2001, 39). Thus, the emergence in the 1990s of the phenomenon of women flooding the temples during temple fairs or important festivals may suggest that

women are feeling helpless as their lives are engulfed by rapid social changes and unfair treatment, and that they are seeking spiritual support in pre-1949 local traditions.

In fact, prior to 1949, women often felt helpless after marriage, having left their parents and family and become part of a different family. In the new family, a woman had to take on all of the household tasks. If she could not solve problems with her children, and particularly with her sons, then she was often held responsible. For instance, if her son were to go out with his father and get hurt, even though both parents would worry very much about their son, she would be responsible for his recovery. Or, if a married couple failed to have any sons, the wife would be the only one blamed and the husband would be given the right to take a concubine. Normally, the woman's natal family would not provide support for her, as her ties to her natal families had been severed symbolically and literally (JOHNSON 1983, 8). When women turned to folk religious practices for support, the magical beliefs concerning the predetermination of fate would, as maintained by Yang, "breed the attitude of resignation even under adverse circumstance, which was characteristic of the Chinese, instead of inspiring people to challenge the social institution" (YANG 1970, 55). Yang's analysis suggests that folk religion serves the function of mitigating the social difficulties that women face by introducing the concept of supernatural predeterminism. Based upon this understanding, it seems that the revived folk religious practices in the 1990s perhaps also serve the function of easing the women's frustration caused by the resurgence of a patriarchal social order in both the domestic and economic sectors.

In addition, folk religions also have the effect of undergirding traditional gender relations in the family. Prior to 1949, a woman was considered an "inside person" and her duty was to stay indoors and tend to domestic affairs (WOLF 1985, 81). Going to temples to burn incense to the gods and to pray for her husband, children, and other family matters was considered one of her domestic responsibilities. Men also believed in deities, but only went to temples if they faced important issues concerning their business, the welfare of the family, or the matters concerning the entire lineage. Before 1949, when a clash between lineages or villages was about to take place, men would go to the temples and worship deities, asking for blessings. As Kendall maintains, these different religious practices reflect the relative authority of men and women in a Chinese household; that is, women are considered to be "inside persons" and occupy a lowly position (KENDALL 1986, 65–66). With the revival of temple worship in the 1990s, a large number of devotees are women, whose prayers to the deities mainly concern domestic matters. They pray on every first and fifteenth day of each lunar month for the welfare of their husbands, children, and other family matters. For instance, when their children fall ill frequently, it is their duty to

find shamans and perform ceremonies in the temple, inviting deities to heal their children's illness. Or, if a married couple does not have a son, it is the wife's duty to pray to the deities, or else she will be blamed for not living up to her duty. Not surprisingly, the number of the statues of Guanyin, Baiyi Niangniang, and Shier Nainiang is increasing dramatically in the temples. It seems to be evident that the communist ideology of feminism has failed to empower women liberated from their traditionally defined role of "inside person." Since the launching of rural economic reforms, women have left collective labor and have returned to household labor (NEE 1986, 198). Apart from seeking spiritual comfort, it is again considered a kind of domestic duty for women to go to the temples to worship deities. To a great extent, this division in religious activities reinforces traditional gender relationships in the family (KENDALL 1986, 66; see also COHEN 1992, 354–77).

In traditional China, although folk religions were not sources of moral virtues, they were the sanctioning agents (YANG 1970, 278–93). Yang maintains that the magic in folk religion contained "no moral dogma of universal validity for social life," but when people communicated with the deities they respected "the morality that the spirits were supposed to sanction in the popular cults" (YANG 1970, 283). Obviously, the resurgence in belief in magic serves a similar function. Part of the content of the incantation sung by Ah Kiu during the spiritualization ceremony of *kai huayuan* is, in fact, Confucian teachings. More importantly, when women want to deal with their emotional and social difficulties, the messages they hear from the deities always convey the idea of observing the "three obediences" (三從). Thus, after the séances, Ah Kiu always tells her clients to be good wives and obedient daughters-in-law. Magic does not only breed an attitude of resignation in women under adverse circumstances (YANG 1970, 55), it also undergirds the ideological structure of a revived patrilineal system, in which women are expected to be subordinate to men.

It is believed that economic modernization will transform the traditional family relationships that have been revived, as women try to establish a more egalitarian relationship with men (THIREAU 1988, 305–10). But if the observation of the reciprocal relationship between folk religious practices and patrilineal gender relations is valid, it seems that revived folk religions may serve the function of reinforcing the resurged traditional gender inequalities.

NOTES

1. For the resurgence of folk religions in Taiwan, see WELLER (1994).
2. Studies show that folk religion has flourished since 1979. See FEUCHTWANG (1996; 2000); KIPNIS (2001, 32–46); and WALDRON (1998, 325).
3. This concept is from John TOMLINSON (1999, 61).

4. Yang maintains that folk religion lacks the “structural prominence of a formally organized religious system in the institutional framework of Chinese society.” He also cites Weber, who considered folk religion in China to be the worship of “a chaotic mass of functional gods” (YANG 1970, 20).

5. See YANG (1970, 28–57). Another work on religious systems and kinship is that of Margaret MEAD (1930, 70). FORTES also expresses the same view: “In the most general terms, therefore, the ancestor cult is the transposition to the religious place of the relationships of parents and children; and that is what I mean by describing it as the ritualization of filial piety” (FORTES 1959, 30; see also HSU 1983, 251–62).

6. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, it is unlikely that temple worshippers are mainly women. Also, no study on temple worship has mentioned that the devotees are mainly women. For instance, Kenneth Dean and Julian Pas’s works illustrate that both women and men go to the temples to ask for blessings. See PAS (1989, 158–209) and DEAN (1989a, 51–78).

7. I have conducted fieldwork on the relationship between economic modernity and the revival of the patrilineal system in Baixiu Village since 1994. The revival of folk religions came to my attention in 1996, when the inhabitants of Baixiu Village were rebuilding the two temples. Since then I have conducted fieldwork on folk religions occasionally. All the names of the villages, people, and places except Dongguan and Guangdong are fictitious. This was done to protect the privacy of the informants.

8. These kinds of temples are common in the Pearl River Delta. See AIJIMER and HO (2000, 187–92).

9. In fact, temples have been rebuilt in other provinces as well. See PAS 1989, 158–209.

10. AIJIMER and HO (2000, 193) feel that villagers in the Pearl River Delta are pragmatic and utilitarian in worshipping deities in the temples.

11. Indeed, the gods and deities are conveniently and pragmatically interpreted. See AIJIMER and HO 2000, 198.

12. There are different kinds of shamans in southeastern China. The first are the *fu-ki*, who are mainly Taoist priests. When they communicate with the gods, they must cleanse themselves and must eat vegetarian food. Concerning *fu-ki*, see LI (1992, 25). The second are the *tang-ki*, who also belong to the Taoist cults. They communicate with gods and ghosts by being possessed by them. The communication mostly takes place in a communal *jiao* sacrifice or festival procession. Concerning *tang-ki*, see JORDAN (1972, 67–84) and DEAN (1989b, 21–98). The third one is the *mann mae phox* (POTTER 1974, 207–231), who will be discussed in this section. They are mostly women in the area of the Pearl River Delta. They do not belong to any religious cults, some of them are affiliated with temples, and some stay in their own houses in the village.

13. JORDAN (1972, 68) points out that “[t]here seems to be a tendency however for female [shamans] to be associated often with purely local divinities who answer individual petitions at private altars in the medium’s home, whereas male [shamans] seem usually to operate by visiting the family of the petitioner or guiding village affairs in the village temple.” See also KENDALL (1986, 66).

14. This is quite common in Guangdong. See also AIJIMER and HO 2000, 157.

15. If one’s permanent household registration is cancelled, one is not allowed to stay legally in their hometown otherwise one will be fined by the local government. This stringent measure for penalizing those who intended to breach the birth control policy was not a national policy and it was lifted recently in the place where the fieldwork was conducted.

16. In the countryside in Guangdong couples are allowed to have two children if their first born is a daughter. But they will be fined, like other areas on the mainland, if they have more than two children. See AIJIMER and HO 2000, 128.

17. There are three combinations of the two pieces of wood when they are used in divining the will of deities. The luckiest outcome is the combination of a convex and a flat side facing upward, representing the harmony of yin (陰) and yang (陽). The other two combinations are either two convex sides or two flat sides facing upward.

18. BEAVER, HON, and WANG (1995, 228) also mention that the status of women is also influenced by patriarchal ideology.

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